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# ***MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES***

***TITLE: A FAILURE IN STRATEGY:  
AMERICA AND THE VIETNAM WAR 1965-1968***

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FOREGOING STATEMENT.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Title:** A FAILURE IN STRATEGY:  
AMERICA AND THE VIETNAM WAR 1965-1968

**Author:** MAJOR JAMES M. BRIGHT USMC

**Thesis:** Could the US have implemented a different strategy for the successful containment of communism in N. Vietnam.

### Discussion:

On 16 June 1965, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara defined the U.S. strategy in Vietnam:

*Our objective, our strategy, is to convince the North Vietnamese that their Communist-inspired, directed, and supported guerilla action to overthrow the established government in the South cannot be achieved, and then to negotiate for the future peace and security of that country.*<sup>1</sup>

In order to achieve this national strategy, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, on 28 July 1965, approved U.S. troop buildup in South Vietnam to 175,000 men. Additionally, he granted General Westmoreland, Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) freedom of maneuver as he saw fit. This new military strategy, of attrition warfare, set the stage for a U.S. military showdown against the communist forces of North Vietnam which would ultimately cause the destruction of the Johnson administration, the eventual pull out of all American forces from Vietnam, and the consequent collapse of South Vietnam to communism.

The U.S. strategy pursued in Vietnam between 1965-1968 to "contain" communism above the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel was flawed. This paper analysis the primary factors in President Johnson decision to expand U.S. involvement in Vietnam with the introduction of ground forces. Second, this paper provides an analysis of U.S. military strategy and identifies its strategic weaknesses.

### Conclusion(s) or Recommendation(s):

An alternative U.S. grand strategy, in concurrence with Bruce Palmer's, *The 25-year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam*, is proposed. This strategy, if implemented, would have galvanized the people behind the U.S. strategy in Vietnam. It would have given the military Commanders in Vietnam the flexibility required to execute a military strategy capable of defeating not only the communist forces of North Vietnam but also the pacification of South Vietnam. Lastly, and most important, this proposed strategy would provide President Johnson the means to achieve the stated goal of communist containment in Vietnam.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), p 190.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

*The original means of strategy is victory - that is tactical success - its end, in the final analysis, are those objects which will lead directly to peace.<sup>1</sup>*

-Carl Von Clausewitz

On 16 June 1965, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara defined the U.S. strategy in Vietnam:

*Our objective, our strategy, is to convince the North Vietnamese that their Communist-inspired, directed, and supported guerilla action to overthrow the established government in the South cannot be achieved, and then to negotiate for the future peace and security of that country.<sup>2</sup>*

In order to achieve this national strategy, President Lyndon Baines Johnson, on 28 July 1965, approved U.S. troop buildup in South Vietnam to 175,000 men. Additionally, he granted General Westmoreland, Commander, United States Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) freedom of maneuver as he saw fit.<sup>3</sup> This new military strategy set the stage for a U.S. military showdown against the communist forces of North Vietnam which would ultimately cause the destruction of the Johnson Administration, the eventual pull out of all American forces from Vietnam, and the consequent collapse of South Vietnam to communism.

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1976), p 143.

<sup>2</sup> Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995), p 190.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce Palmer Jr., *The 25-Year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1984), p 41.

The U.S. strategy pursued in Vietnam between 1965-1968 to "contain" communism above the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel was flawed. This paper will first analyze the primary factors in President Johnson's decision to expand U.S. involvement in Vietnam with the introduction of ground forces. Second, it will argue that this new U.S. strategy would not meet the containment objective. The argument will be broken down into four sub-elements: First, this paper will identify the underlying factors that led General Westmoreland to adopt the military strategy of "attrition warfare." Second, it will provide an analysis of U.S. military strategy and identify its strategic weaknesses. Third, this paper will provide an analysis of the "national will" of the American government and the people. It will prove that without the support of the national will, the U.S. strategy in Vietnam could not be achieved. Fourth, it will provide an analysis of North Vietnam's grand and military strategy that will lay the foundation for a U.S. strategy that could have proved successful. Lastly, this paper will provide an alternative U.S. grand strategy that, in concurrence with Bruce Palmer's strategy proposed in *The 25-year War: America's Military Role in Vietnam*, may have attained the goal of communist containment in Vietnam.

## II. Historical Background

President Truman and his Administration, upon the conclusion of WWII, resolved that the Soviet Union's objective was the expansionism of communism throughout the globe. In order to counter or meet this Soviet threat, George F. Kennan, Head of the State Departments newly created Policy Planning Staff, recommended, in his article "The Sources of Soviet Conduct,"<sup>4</sup> that the U.S. maintain a long term patient but firm and vigilant containment of Russian expansive tendencies. This article was the foundation that led to the new U.S. grand strategy of communist containment. This new grand strategy pursued the national objective of defending the freedom of all independent nations worldwide.<sup>5</sup> Containment became the U.S. policy to block the expansion of communism by all means short of direct conflict with the Soviet Union. All situations, great or small, regardless of the circumstances, when it involved the containment of communism, were now considered "vital" to the United States' national interests.

The three years following Kennan's article saw further examples of what was deemed as further Soviet communist expansion. The communist "Red" Chinese under Mao Zedong had successfully defeated the forces of Chiang Kai-shek and were

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<sup>4</sup> George F. Kennan's article, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct" is published in *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 25, no. 4 (July 1947).

providing aid to Ho Chi Minh's revolution in Indo-China. Additionally, the Soviet Union had recently detonated an atomic bomb and it was feared that they would militarily move against Western Europe. Paul H. Nitze, George Kennan's successor, was tasked with formulating a new strategic report. His report, which was to become NSC-68<sup>6</sup>, called for a "substantial and rapid" buildup "to support a firm policy intended to check and roll back the Kremlin's drive for world domination."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, NSC-68 outlined five major tasks for the military: "defend the Western Hemisphere, protect the mobilization base, conduct offensive operations to destroy "vital elements of the Soviet war-making capacity" and to blunt the enemy's offensives, protect bases and lines of communication, and provide aid to allied powers."<sup>8</sup>

President Eisenhower, following the Truman Administration, expanded upon this containment policy with the introduction of the Domino Theory Policy. This policy compared all potentially threatened states/countries by communism as a series of aligned dominoes; if one were allowed to fall to communism, it would compromise the stability of the entire region which, in turn

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<sup>5</sup> Robert S. McNamara, *Argument Without End: In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy* (New York: Public Affairs, 1999) p 41.

<sup>6</sup> National Security Council Report #68 can be read in its entirety in *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1950 vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, various years).

<sup>7</sup> Herman S. Wolk, *The Blueprint for Cold War Defense* URL: <<http://www.afa.org/magazine/0300coldwar.html>>, accessed 16 January 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

would cause the eventual collapse of the other countries/states in that region.<sup>9</sup> This collapse of countries to communism would then extend to the fall of nations to communism around the world. President Kennedy and later President Johnson would adopt the Domino Theory in regards to Indochina.

Following the North Vietnamese defeat of the French at Dien Bien Phu, the Geneva Accords, adopted 20 July 1954, divided Vietnam into two zones clearly demarcated along the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel. The effect of this "administrative arrangement" was to end the developing "face off" of military escalation in Southeast Asia between the United States, Soviet Union, and China. This demarcation line established the political border between North and South Vietnam with the North adopting a single-party, totalitarian, socialist regime, while the South had a nationalistic government in which pluralism and free enterprise were encouraged.<sup>10</sup> The Geneva Accords additionally called for a general election to be held in two years for the reunification of the country. Despite ending eight years of hostilities, the Accords ignored the unreconcilable differences between the North and South and left the true political outcome unanswered.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1994), p 626-627.

<sup>10</sup> Ngoc Lung Hoang, *Strategy and Tactics* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1980), p 1.

<sup>11</sup> Kissinger, 635.

On 8 September 1954, seven countries<sup>12</sup> signed the Southeast Asia Collective Defense Treaty (SEATO). The key portion of this treaty, Article IV, stated that armed aggression in Southeast Asia against a treaty member or a protocol state protected by this treaty, of which South Vietnam was one, "would endanger its own peace and security." Each member pledged that, in the event of armed aggression, they would "act to meet the common danger in accordance with its constitutional process."<sup>13</sup> SEATO was the main source document for future U.S. action in Vietnam.

In the late 1950's, Ngo Din Diem's U.S. backed democratic regime of South Vietnam appeared to make progress in stabilizing the economy and establishing centralized control. However, this soon eroded due to various internal problems and increased communist pressure from the North. One major internal problem was the lack of nationalistic support for the Diem regime and an independent South Vietnam. This was mainly due to a cultural background that was marred with years of internal conflicts. All key political assignments went to Catholics and few to none went to the Buddhists who made up eighty percent of the population. Second, the Diem regime, in an effort to squelch any threat to this new nationality, increasingly suppressed the

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<sup>12</sup> The seven countries: Australia, France, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, Thailand, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

<sup>13</sup> Lyndon B. Johnson, *The Vantage Point; Perspective of the Presidency* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971), p 48.

populace, as any opposition was viewed as treason.<sup>14</sup> Lastly, the lack of sound infrastructure, required to support a newly formed semi-democratic style of government, was not present. Therefore, any "nation-building" strategy, implemented by Diem and supported by the U.S. to strengthen South Vietnam against the communist pressure from the north, failed. The guerrilla war of the North, on the other hand, found fertile ground in its subversion of the Diem regime. Circumstances were ideal to undermine this new governing institution with little cohesion and then the rest of Indochina.

In 1961, the Kennedy Administration decided that the most effective means to minimize this domino effect was through the doctrine of Flexible Response. The fundamentals of Flexible Response led naturally to four assumptions: (1) the defense of Southeast Asia was crucial to the maintenance of world order; (2) force could be applied in Vietnam with precision and discrimination; (3) means existed to effectively evaluate performance; lastly, (4) the effects would enhance American power, prestige, and credibility in the world.<sup>15</sup> The belief in Flexible Response, along with Kennedy's statement "we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, and oppose any foe to assure the survival and the

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<sup>14</sup> Kissinger, 639.

<sup>15</sup> John L. Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment* (Oxford, NY: University Press), p 238.

success of liberty,"<sup>16</sup> cemented the U.S. national objective to prevent the communist domination of South Vietnam.

In August 1963, with the South Vietnamese government experiencing increased difficulty with the struggle against the Viet Cong guerilla war, the Kennedy Administration, fearing a secret deal between North and South Vietnam, authorized the overthrow of President Diem. The coup destroyed the structure of the government and left in its place a group of generals with little or no experience in the political arena. Kennedy hoped that Diem's removal would rally support behind the generals and spark the spirit of nationalism; however, the reverse occurred. Following the assassination of President Diem, there were various power struggles that almost shattered the reeling government.<sup>17</sup> Immediately seeing the vulnerability of the weakened government, the North seized the opportunity; guerilla forces were strengthened and infiltration into the South accelerated. Therefore, the added internal and external friction did nothing but plague the South with increased political instability and no true leadership.<sup>18</sup>

In August of 1964, a presumed North Vietnamese attack on the cruiser *Maddox* was answered by U.S. air strikes against North Vietnam. President Johnson conducted these air strikes under

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<sup>16</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p 30.

<sup>17</sup> Phillip B. Davidson, *Vietnam at War: The History 1946-1975* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1988), p 303.

<sup>18</sup> Gaddis, p 247.



the guidelines established by the Southeast Asia Resolution (miscalled the "Gulf of Tonkin Resolution"). This resolution, approved by the House and Senate, authorized the President to "take all necessary action to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." More importantly, the resolution also stated that the U.S. was "prepared as the President determines, to take all necessary steps, including the use of armed force, to assist any member or protocol state of SEATO requesting assistance in defense of its freedom."<sup>19</sup> This became the basis for President Johnson's future escalation.

Following these air strikes, communist forces counter-struck on 7 February 1965 by attacking the U.S. air base and the advisor's barracks in Pleiku. This action, though small in comparison, was the spark that set in motion the continual escalation of the Vietnam War. The attacks at Pleiku, in turn, were met with a U.S. retaliatory air strike from targets already selected from the FLAMING DART<sup>20</sup> program. FLAMING DART quickly turned into a systematic air campaign code named ROLLING THUNDER. In March 1965, ROLLING THUNDER<sup>21</sup> was designed to interdict North Vietnamese transportation routes in the southern

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<sup>19</sup> Johnson, p 118.

<sup>20</sup> FLAMING DART was the operational name for air strikes, just North of the DMZ, in retaliation for the Viet Cong attacks at Pleiku. ROLLING THUNDER would succeed FLAMING DART in March 1965.

portion of North Vietnam in order to slow down the infiltration of men and material into South Vietnam. Fearing Viet Cong retaliation for FLAMING DART/ROLLING THUNDER, President Johnson, on 26 February authorized the dispatch of two Marine battalions to Da Nang. "Everyone, from the president on down to Ambassador Taylor and Admiral Sharp, saw these two Marine battalions as purely security troops and as an isolated phenomenon rather than as part of a sequence."<sup>22</sup> ROLLING THUNDER had a short life as the U.S. sole offensive in Vietnam. Future actions by the communist North Vietnamese forced President Johnson to escalate the war effort to include ground combat forces.

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<sup>21</sup> In July 1966, ROLLING THUNDER was expanded to include North Vietnamese ammunition dumps and oil storage facilities. In 1967, it was further expanded to include power plants, factories, and airfields in the Hanoi-Haiphong area. ROLLING THUNDER was ended on 1 November 1968.

<sup>22</sup> Davidson, p 343.

### III. U.S. STRATEGY: INTRODUCTION OF GROUND FORCES

*I had never visited Indochina, nor did I understand or appreciate its history, language, culture, or values. The same must be said, to varying degrees, about President Kennedy, Secretary of State Dean Rusk, National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy, military advisor Maxwell Taylor, and many others. When it came to Vietnam, we found ourselves setting policy for a region that was terra incognita.*<sup>23</sup>

-Secretary of Defense McNamara

Throughout the Kennedy years and initially into the Johnson years, the U.S. operated on two strategic premises that ultimately proved contradictory. The first was that the fall of South Vietnam to communism would threaten the security of the United States and the Western World. The second was that the South Vietnamese could defend their nation, and therefore, America should limit its role.<sup>24</sup> However, by 1965, it was clear that the South Vietnamese could not defend South Vietnam. If the U.S. was to ensure the stability of South Vietnam, a commitment of U.S. and Free World ground forces was required.

The reason for this dramatic shift in U.S. national strategy toward South Vietnam was three fold: first and most significant, North Vietnam had escalated the war in South Vietnam to a new stage with the introduction of North Vietnamese regular forces (NVA) across the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel. This action gave grave concern to the Johnson Administration. The belief (right

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<sup>23</sup> McNamara, p 32.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p 29.

or wrong) up until that point was that the South Vietnamese forces were holding their own against the Viet Cong guerillas. However, with the introduction of NVA regular forces, this new threat was unmanageable. The introduction of regular forces, coupled with poor South Vietnamese leadership, caused an increase in desertion rates and, most critical, a reluctance of the South Vietnamese to assume the offense against the NVA. According to D. R. Palmer, "By committing its regular forces to a cause which had previously been cloaked in the guise of an internal war, Hanoi dramatically altered the entire thrust and scope of the conflict. It was a key command decision. Indeed, it may well have been the key command decision of the war."<sup>25</sup>

Second, the air campaign ROLLING THUNDER proved ineffective. By mid March 1965, General Westmoreland and Ambassador Taylor viewed ROLLING THUNDER as so ineffective that it would take at least six months at the current rate before any benefit would be achieved. However, with the introduction of NVA forces in the South, the South Vietnamese would collapse long before this six-month period was complete.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, in response to ROLLING THUNDER, Hanoi became more belligerent towards the U.S. in negotiating a peace settlement. The communist North Vietnamese had recently introduced a new "Four Points" peace formula, which

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<sup>25</sup> Dave R. Palmer, *Summons of the Trumpet: U.S. Vietnam in Perspective* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), p 62.

<sup>26</sup> Davidson, p 344.

centered on a U.S. acceptance of a communist controlled South Vietnam. However, U.S. efforts to reach a diplomatic solution to this new Four Points formula were denied. Hanoi refused to meet with U.S. ambassadors and official dispatches from the ambassador's office were returned.

Third, the political instability in South Vietnam had intensified. There was a successful coup against the civilian government of Phan Huy Quat that led to the installment of Army General Nguyen Van Thieu as chief of state and Air Force General Nguyen Cao Ky as prime minister. Neither of these two were capable to execute the duties of their new positions. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Affairs William Bundy recalled, "They [Ky and Thieu] were the bottom of the barrel, absolutely the bottom of the barrel."<sup>27</sup>

On 7 June 1965, General Westmoreland sent a dispatch to the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) outlining the grim situation in South Vietnam. General Westmoreland indicated that if President Johnson wanted to maintain an independent South Vietnam, he would have to deploy U.S. forces immediately. "I see no course of action open to us except to reinforce our efforts in SVN [South Vietnam] with additional U.S. or third country forces as rapidly as is practical during the critical weeks ahead. Additionally, studies must continue and plans developed to

deploy even greater forces, if and when required."<sup>28</sup> This request to the JCS was noteworthy at the strategic level because if accepted, it meant a significant and open-ended expansion of American military involvement in South Vietnam.

Additionally, external political factors weighed heavily on President Johnson's strategic decision. The severity of this decision was best articulated in a letter from Secretary State Dean Rusk to President Johnson articulating the devastation to U.S. credibility on the world stage if he [Johnson] allowed the collapse of South Vietnam.

*The integrity of the U.S. commitment is the principle pillar of peace throughout the world. If that commitment becomes unreliable, the communist world would draw conclusions that would lead to our ruin and almost certainly to a catastrophic war. So long as the South Vietnamese are prepared to fight for themselves, we [U.S.] cannot abandon them without disaster to peace and to our interest throughout the world.*<sup>29</sup>

President Johnson also felt obligated to fully support the parameters set forth by the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution by employing all measures necessary to ensure the sovereignty of South Vietnam. He was deeply concerned about political ramifications on the world stage if the U.S. did not fully support this resolution. "I do not think we can get out of there with our treaty [Gulf of Tonkin] like it is and with what

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<sup>27</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p 186.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p 188.

all we've said and I think it would just lose us faith in the world."<sup>30</sup>

These factors ultimately led President Johnson to change the U.S. strategy in Vietnam from providing training and logistical support to armed conflict in which became a long and protracted war.

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<sup>29</sup> McNamara, *In Retrospect*, p 195.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p 191.

#### IV. U.S. MILITARY STRATEGY

*To put a rein on an able general while at the same time asking him to suppress a cunning enemy is like tying up the Black Hound of Han and then ordering him to catch elusive hares.*<sup>31</sup>

-Sun Tzu

In early 1965, the U.S. did not have a clear defined military strategy to deal with the emergence of the regular forces of the North Vietnamese Army. The "grand strategy" for the containment of communism above the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel still stood; however, a military strategy to achieve this grand strategy had not been adopted. In August, 1965, the JCS advocated an overall strategic concept of U.S. military operations in Southeast Asia that visualized three tasks: (1) compel Hanoi to "cease and desist" in the South; (2) defeat the Viet Cong in South Vietnam and extend government control over all of the South; and (3) deter China from intervening and defeat any intervention should one occur. To support these tasks the JCS pressed for a partial mobilization (reserve callup) not only to provide a sustaining base for U.S. forces in Southeast Asia, but also to reconstitute a strategic reserve of U.S. forces at home.<sup>32</sup>

The military strategy that the JCS envisioned called for a sustained air and naval campaign against North Vietnam, and their lines of communication (roads, railroads, and waterways)



to their forces in the South. Further, blockades of North Vietnam, as well as land and air actions in Laos and Cambodia, would be implemented in order to stop the movement of enemy troops and supplies. The Chiefs also visualized a U.S. logistic effort in Thailand. This logistic base would preclude the emergence of U.S. ground combat forces in Thailand and it was their belief that this action would deter future Chinese aggression. The Chiefs consistently pressed Secretary of Defense McNamara<sup>33</sup> and President Johnson for their adoption of this strategic concept; however, their recommendations were never fully accepted by either.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the strategy presented by the JCS, President Johnson rejected any ground expansion of the Vietnam War outside the borders of South Vietnam except the continued bombing campaign in the North. Primarily, President Johnson was concerned with the possible intervention of Chinese forces as had recently occurred during the Korean War. President Johnson's belief of Chinese intervention in Vietnam was based on Chinese Defense Minister Lin Piao's manifesto, "People's War," which spoke grandly of "encircling" the world's industrial

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<sup>31</sup> Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, trans. By Samuel B. Griffith (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), p 84.

<sup>32</sup> Palmer, 42.

<sup>33</sup> Secretary of Defense McNamara supported General Westmoreland's request of 185,000 troops be sent to Vietnam by the end of '65. McNamara also supported the call-up of the reserves and a tax increase to pay for the war; however, President Johnson rejected both ideas. For in-depth account of the relationship between the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Secretary of Defense McNamara, and President Johnson in regards to the introduction of ground forces into Vietnam, chapters 13-15 in H.R. McMaster's book, *Dereliction of Duty*, is recommended.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p 42.

powers by revolutions throughout the Third World.<sup>35</sup> In addition to avoiding Chinese intervention, President Johnson was determined to pursue a diplomatic course for a relaxation of tensions with the Soviet Union. He was concerned that a rapid expansion of U.S. military forces throughout Indochina might entice a response from the Soviet Union and Vietnam was not worth this possibility. Lastly, President Johnson was eager to maintain a consensus behind his Great Society domestic program. This program remained his first priority and anything that detracted from that would not be allowed. For these primary reasons, U.S. ground action was contained within the confines of South Vietnam. This stipulation reduced the military strategy in South Vietnam to a strategic defense that allowed U.S. ground forces to operate only within the confines of South Vietnam.

In order not to violate the direction of the President by not expanding the war and with no clear policy from the Secretary of Defense and the JCS, General Westmoreland implemented the military strategy of attrition war, which was labeled "Search and Destroy." General Westmoreland's rationale for the search and destroy strategy was four fold: first, the main threat was not the Viet Cong guerillas but from main force units of the Viet Cong and particularly North Vietnamese Army. These were the true threats to the South Vietnamese government.

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<sup>35</sup> Kissinger, p 644-645.

Second, enemy main force units operated in difficult and unpopulated areas. In order to locate these forces it required U.S. forces to relocate out of the populated areas where their presence would potentially cause social and economic problems. Third, once established in these remote locations, U.S. forces could fight its own ground war, unhampered by the requirement to coordinate with South Vietnamese military and civilian authorities. Fourth and most important, it left pacification to the South Vietnamese government and its troops. To General Westmoreland, the South Vietnamese were infinitely more able to handle their own people than the Americans.<sup>36</sup>

This attrition war strategy set the stage for military action that lasted from June 1965 to the Tet Offensive of 1968. It was a strategy that General Westmoreland believed would allow the U.S. forces the freedom of action to combat communist forces throughout the confines of South Vietnam and win.<sup>37</sup> However, the implementations of this strategy imposed severe consequences.

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<sup>36</sup> Davidson, p 353.

<sup>37</sup> Lieutenant General Victor Krulak, Commanding General, Fleet Marine Force, Pacific was in disagreement with General Westmoreland and felt that the strategy of attrition would fail because it was the enemy's game. LtGen Krulak felt that attrition would erode the national will of the U.S. people and ultimately cause the U.S. to cease in its support of South Vietnam. "Krulak wanted to adopt a strategy of pacification that would seek the support of the Vietnamese peasantry through a generous program of land reform and other social and economic benefits and change." (Neil Sheehan, *A Bright Shining Lie*, (New York: Random House, 1988), p 630-631) LtGen Krulak briefed President Johnson in 1966 of his plan but it was not accepted.

## V. ANALYSIS OF U.S. STRATEGY

*War plans cover every aspect of a war, and weave them all into a single operation that must have a single, ultimate objective in which all particular aims are reconciled. No one starts a war - or rather, no one in his senses ought to do so - without first being clear in his mind what he intends to achieve by that war and how he intends to conduct it.*<sup>38</sup>

-Clausewitz

The weakness of the U.S. strategy in South Vietnam can be attributed not only to the military operations conducted in South Vietnam but additionally the political factors that affected the military's execution of the war effort. The first weakness of the strategy employed in Vietnam was the restrictive parameters placed upon the military commanders responsible for the execution of the war. General Westmoreland was forced to execute a war with a passive/defensive military strategy.

From the outset of ground operations in 1965, the U.S. military was handicapped by a strategy of passive defense, and as a result, U.S. ground forces could not decisively erode the enemy forces outside the confines of South Vietnam. The strategic implications of this passive strategy were disastrous. First, if the North Vietnamese forces required resupply of either men or material, all that was required was to move North across the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel and/or West into Laos. Due to the restrictions placed upon U.S. forces of non-pursuit into these

areas, communist forces regarded these national boundaries as safe heavens. Additionally, these safe heavens allowed the North Vietnamese to reconstitute and assume offensive operations at a timing and location of their discretion.

Secondly, this military strategy, in order to defend all areas, required combat forces to be deployed and based throughout South Vietnam. This in turn required huge combat support and logistical bases to be established to support these forces. These bases, in turn, required additional combat forces to provide security from enemy forces. This huge footprint caused large demands upon personnel in CONUS. Strategically, many of these forces were earmarked for deployments and/or commitments in other world regions, primarily Europe.

Thirdly, these large U.S. base-camps, spread throughout South Vietnam, played into the hands of the North Vietnamese forces. Major supply lines were tied to the few roads and rail lines that ran parallel to the coast. These supply lines were major vulnerabilities throughout the Vietnam War. Furthermore, search and destroy patrols originating from these numerous sites forced enemy units to establish operational bases in the mountainous and remote border regions of South Vietnam. The communist forces used the numerous undefended routes from these

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<sup>38</sup> Clausewitz, p 579.

bases, to attack populated areas in the coastal plains and the main supply routes.

Lastly, there was a fundamental weakness of the search and destroy strategy. This strategy required four important elements in which to be successful: find the enemy, fix the enemy, fight the enemy, and destroy the enemy.<sup>39</sup> As mentioned, finding the enemy was a difficult task. First, the Viet Cong forces easily hid themselves amongst the local populace. Second, when the communist forces were organized combatant units, the jungle and mountainous region offered endless possibilities for well-camouflaged and remote outpost. Fixing the enemy at the operational level was an impossibility because Viet Cong and North Vietnamese regular forces had freedom of maneuver into Laos, Cambodia, or across the DMZ. Additionally, the personnel strength of the enemy forces did not lend itself for large scale fixing operations. The North Vietnamese forces massed only at times of their choosing (attack) and then disbanded into smaller size forces for exfiltration. "Traveling in small groups of 40 to 50, and later in larger groups of 300 to 500 they infiltrated following land routes leading from North Vietnam's Military Region 4 through Laos into the First and Second Military Region of the Republic of Vietnam (see map on p

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<sup>39</sup> Davidson, p 404.

38)." <sup>40</sup> Without being able to successfully find and fix the communist forces, then fighting and finishing the enemy forces could not be successfully accomplished. At the tactical level, when U.S. forces were successful in locating enemy forces, they were by and large victorious. U.S. military forces proved tactically superior time and time again in numerous engagements such as Army in the Ia Drang Valley as well as the Marines in operations such as HASTINGS, PRAIRIE, and STARLITE. <sup>41</sup> However, the strategy of attrition warfare relied on finishing the enemy and the U.S. did not factor in the unprecedented price in lives that North Vietnam was willing to pay for victory. "In comparison with the 47,244 Americans killed in action in Vietnam, communist losses ranged between 600,000 and 1 million. Using the lower figure, the communist lost some 3 percent of their population in battle deaths, compared with the 1.4 percent Japanese battle deaths in World War II." <sup>42</sup> The willingness of Ho Chi Minh and General Giap to accept these casualties, which were equivalent in population terms of some 6 to 7 million American casualties, in retrospect suggest that the attrition war strategy was based on a false premise. <sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Hoang, p 4.

<sup>41</sup> "Vietnam at War" URL: <<http://www.vwam.com/vets/marinehistory.html>>, accessed 14 December 2000.

<sup>42</sup> Harry G. Summers Jr., *The Vietnam War Almanac* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1999), p 91.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p 91.

The second weakness of the strategy employed in Vietnam was that the U.S. tried to "Americanize" the war.<sup>44</sup> By the end of 1965, U.S. forces were in excess of 181,000 troops in South Vietnam. Forces were rapidly built up in the region to eight and one third divisions and seven tactical air wings in 1966 which equaled in excess of 385,000 servicemen.<sup>45</sup> Where the U.S. did not have forces, it compensated by increasing the number of advisors. By the end of 1967, advisors equaled in excess of 23,000. Additionally, free world forces<sup>46</sup> by the end of 1967, largely Koreans, Thais and Australians, equaled an additional three divisions that were all U.S. financed.<sup>47</sup> By the end of 1968, American divisions reached approximately eleven division equivalents and nine tactical air wings with the Army advisor contingent equivalent to another seven divisions. This "Americanization" of the war further damaged the relationship between the United States and the South Vietnamese by giving the impression that the U.S. lacked confidence in the South Vietnam government and forces.<sup>48</sup>

The third and most critical weakness of the strategy employed in Vietnam was the U.S., by placing its primary

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<sup>44</sup> Palmer, p 178.

<sup>45</sup> Davidson, p 395.

<sup>46</sup> 39 Nations besides the U.S. supported South Vietnam under the Free World assistance program. The major contributors were Koreans (48,869), Thais (11,568), and Australians (7,672). Other contributing countries: Japan, Pakistan, Iran, Israel, Turkey, Liberia, Tunisia, Belgium, Ireland, U.K., Canada, Venezuela, and Brazil.

<sup>47</sup> Palmer, p 178-179.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., p 42.



interest in winning the ground war, lost sight of its responsibility to develop and train the South Vietnamese forces to successfully pacify and defend their own country.<sup>49</sup> This unwillingness and oversight in South Vietnamese military training by Military Assistance Command, Vietnam was best exemplified by the compartmented approach to the war in which it lacked any combined U.S.-Vietnam command system. This approach, in which American commanders and their staff were solely in charge of operations within their areas of operations, limited the effectiveness of an allied effort. In General Westmoreland's opinion, a combined U.S./South Vietnam command would stifle the growth of the South Vietnamese leadership and if the South Vietnamese forces fell under U.S. command, it would give credence to the communist that the U.S. was merely a colonial power.<sup>50</sup> However, this decision intensified the lack of command and control between the two forces and at the lower echelon (Corps level), it was virtually nonexistent. The strategic decision of taking the execution of the ground war out of the hands of the South Vietnamese and maintaining a compartmented command structure between the two was unquestionably one of the key reasons for the fall of South Vietnam upon the withdrawal of U.S. forces.

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p 179.

<sup>50</sup> Davidson, p 397.

## VI. NATIONAL WILL: CONGRESS AND THE PEOPLE

*The first, the supreme, the most far reaching act of judgement that the statesmen and the commander have to make is to establish the kind of war they are embarking...neither mistaking it or trying to turn it into something that is alien to its nature. This is the first of all strategic questions and the most comprehensive.*<sup>51</sup>

-Clausewitz

From the outset of Vietnam until the end of his Presidency, Johnson never established the national will of congress and/or the people in the prosecution of the war effort. In fact, President Johnson's primary goal was not to arouse the national will of either towards Vietnam for two reasons. First, he was obsessed with securing Congress's approval and their financing of his Great Society Agenda.<sup>52</sup> Second, he had developed a strong fear from hard line conservatives (Democrats and Republicans) that increased military action might trigger a response, especially nuclear, from China and/or the Soviet Union.<sup>53</sup>

President Johnson discerned that if he went to Congress and asked for a declaration of war in Vietnam, this would end any future hope of his Great Society. As Johnson said: "History provided too many cases where the sound of the bugle put an immediate end to the hopes and dreams of the best reformers: The Spanish-American War drowned the populist spirit; World War I ended Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom; World War II brought the New

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<sup>51</sup> Clausewitz, p 88-89.

<sup>52</sup> Kissinger, p 661.

Deal to a close. Once the war began [Vietnam], then all those conservatives in the Congress would use it as a weapon against the Great Society."<sup>54</sup>

Instead of asking for a declaration of war, President Johnson asked for a resolution to empower him to "take all necessary measures to repel an armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression." The Southeast Asia Resolution passed the Senate by a vote of 88-2 and the house by 416-0.<sup>55</sup> The rationale for not obtaining a declaration of war in 1964 was that neither Johnson nor the Legislature expected a long protracted war. Johnson along with the members of Congress believed that ROLLING THUNDER would provide the punch necessary to bring a cessation of hostilities in Vietnam. However, a declaration of war should have been established by the spring of 1965. By this time, it was obvious that a limited war would not be effective, and the decision by Johnson to implement the search and destroy strategy, should have brought about this declaration of war.

President Johnson did not seek a declaration of war because he wanted to make the escalation to include ground forces as imperceptible as possible to the American public. This was a key strategic error. "The requirement for a declaration of war

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<sup>53</sup> McNamara, p 173.

<sup>54</sup> Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), p 13.

<sup>55</sup> Johnson, p 118.

was rooted in the principle of civilian control of the military, and the failure to declare war in Vietnam drove a wedge between the Army and large segments of the American public."<sup>56</sup> By not calling for and obtaining a declaration of war, Johnson lost what Clausewitz called the strength of the passions of a people mobilized for war. Instead of the passions of the American people strengthening and supporting the U.S. war effort in Vietnam, the more vocal and passionate voices were raised opposing the U.S. commitment in Vietnam.<sup>57</sup>

Additionally, the voices that did rise up against the war were normally raised against the men in the military. This was mainly due in part that the public did not have a clear understanding of the objectives of the Vietnam War. This misunderstanding can be attributed to the misinformation and deceit passed by the Johnson Administration to the American people beginning with the USS Maddox story and lasting throughout the war. This rebellion by those who did not understand the objective of the Vietnam War focused their dissent against the military. "By attacking the executors of US Vietnam policy rather than the makers of that policy, the protestors were striking at the very heart of our democratic system - the civilian control of the military."<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Summers, p 13.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p 17.

<sup>58</sup> Summers, p 17.

After the Tet Offensive of 1968, the escalation of tension between those who opposed the war in Vietnam were increasingly focused against the military as each successive year of the war passed. The tension reached its culmination and can best be characterized by the confrontation at Kent State in 1970. Initially, the student riots were sparked by President Nixon's authorization of military action inside the Cambodian border. The students, unclear of the rationale behind this military action, focused their aggression by attacking those they deemed were the executors of US Vietnam policy, in this case the Ohio National Guard. Rather than, focusing their opposition in the execution of the Vietnam War toward the makers of that policy, their elected officials.

A declaration of war in 1965 would have changed the course of the war. A declaration of war would have legitimized the Vietnam War. A declaration of war would have focused the attention, provided certain responsibilities, and created impediments to dissolution.<sup>59</sup> By involving the American people through this declaration, it would have invoked national will. By not invoking the national will of the American people, it produced a strategic vulnerability that the North Vietnamese were able to successfully exploit.

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid, p 11.

Johnson's neglect in asking for a declaration of war was his most significant failure in regards to establishing the support of the people and congress. "A declaration of war is a clear statement of initial public support which focuses the nation's attention on the enemy. Further, a declaration of war makes the prosecution of the war a shared responsibility of both the government and the American people."<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Summers, p 13.

## VII. North Vietnam Strategy

The North Vietnamese strategy from 1954 through 1975 hinged on one simple concept: the reunification and communization of all North and South Vietnam. Additionally, the leaders in Hanoi had secondary plans for the subjugation and communization of the remaining portions of Indochina (Laos and Cambodia). For the communist leaders, this strategy was a test of will and not of strength; therefore, they were not limited by a restrictive timeline and any means required to accomplish these objectives was justified.<sup>61</sup>

The North Vietnamese strategy used to achieve reunification was based on Marxist-Leninism and heavily influenced by the successful ascension of power by the Chinese Communist. This strategy was built around three key points:

- 1. Rely principally on the people's strength to build mass political power. Win the hearts and minds of the people throughout Vietnam; this in turn, would generate tremendous strength in all localities.*
- 2. Recognize the importance of rural areas. To build bases and rear areas is essential to success.*
- 3. Always maintain the offensive in order to ensure strong protection to base and rear areas, to enlarge them, and to carry the war to the enemy's rear. The rear is the key resource that supports the frontline.*<sup>62</sup>

"The military strategy of North Vietnam was part and parcel of [this] political strategy: no matter how high and widespread

the level of violence, the war was only an extension of politics."<sup>63</sup> Therefore, the military strategy for the reunification of South Vietnam called for a people's war to be fought through three stages: "the stage of contention; the stage of equilibrium; and the general counteroffensive."<sup>64</sup>

In the stage of contention, guerilla warfare would be the dominant force. These forces would conduct swift attacks on government installations and then withdraw. In the stage of equilibrium, communist insurgents would become as strong as the South Vietnamese, stage supplies and resources required for the general counteroffensive while simultaneously attacking the South Vietnamese forces for the purpose of wearing them down and damaging morale. In the general counteroffensive stage, the South Vietnamese would be forced defend and retreat in the face of regular forces supported by guerrillas.<sup>65</sup>

This three stage military strategy was further broken down into a five-step plan of implementation. "Step one provided for propaganda activity to lay the groundwork for the struggle. Step two was the organization of guerrilla forces and the establishment of base areas. Stage three; guerilla units began their local attacks. Stage four called for more vigorous

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<sup>61</sup> Davidson, p 180.

<sup>62</sup> Hoang, p 122-123.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p 122.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., p 3.

<sup>65</sup> Hoang, p 3.



attacks and for the organization of regular forces. Stage five was the large-scale counteroffensive by the regular forces."<sup>66</sup> By 1965, the North Vietnamese were well into stage four and only the U.S. ground forces were capable of denying them of their grand strategic goal.

Hanoi's strategic plan to remove the U.S. influence in South Vietnam was to inflict a humiliating defeat and impose unacceptable political, economic, social, and military costs on the U.S. To accomplish this, the North Vietnamese mobilized world opinion against the U.S.; turned U.S. public opinion against the war by inflicting maximum casualties; exhausted American patience by prolonging the conflict; and lastly, the North Vietnamese painted the U.S.'s effort on the world stage as immoral, illegitimate, and unlawful against a country trying to unify its people under one government.<sup>67</sup>

The North Vietnamese military strategy against the U.S. was directed at three critical points in South Vietnam: Saigon, the northernmost Province (I Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ)), and the Central Highlands of II CTZ. In Saigon, the North Vietnamese maintained a large credible threat that constantly pressured the Capital. These forces established large war zones, immediately north of the capital, in mostly uninhabited jungle areas. Additionally, to the West and just inside the border of

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p 3-4.

Cambodia, they established large safe areas and logistical sites. From these safe areas and war zones to the north, the Viet Cong and Regular forces could attack key points around the city.<sup>68</sup>

In the northern province of I CTZ, the North Vietnamese could quickly attack across the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel. The I CTZ provided the shortest distance from home bases in North Vietnam and forces could be quickly and easily supplied when required. Additionally, this area was the narrowest portion of Vietnam (distance between Laos and the South China Sea). Communist forces could easily infiltrate from either the North or from Laos and attack the northernmost province of Quang Tri and/or Hue, the ancient capital of the Annamite Kingdom that had great psychological importance, immediately south in the Thua Thien Province.<sup>69</sup>

The Central Highlands of in the II CTZ was the strategic key for the military defense of South Vietnam. Militarily, if North Vietnam could successfully attack and secure the provinces of Kontum and Pleiku, they would be in a position to advance further east, along Highway 19 and split South Vietnam in two. If this were accomplished, forces would be trapped in the north and destroyed piecemeal. Additionally, the Montagnard people of

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<sup>67</sup> Palmer, p 180.

<sup>68</sup> Palmer, p 180.

<sup>69</sup> Palmer, p 180.

the Central Highlands were not entirely loyal to the government of South Vietnam. U.S. and South Vietnamese forces operating in this area could never be assured that the Montagnard people encountered supported their cause or the cause of the communist North Vietnamese.<sup>70</sup> Lastly, Ban Me Thout, located in the Dalat province, was the historic capital of the central highlands and was continuously under attack by the communist forces. The fall of Ban Me Thout, to the North Vietnamese, would be a severe psychological blow to the forces and people of South Vietnam.<sup>71</sup>

By maintaining constant pressure on these three points, the North Vietnamese were able to pull U.S. and South Vietnamese forces out of the populated regions, thus opening up other areas to attack. Additionally, this strategy caused the South Vietnamese and U.S. forces to expend valuable time and resources in the defense of these large regions. Lastly, the casualties inflicted on U.S. forces in the defense of these jungle regions became unjustifiable to the American citizen and thus helped to turn public opinion against the war in Vietnam.

On 31 January 1968, North Vietnam implemented their final stage of military strategy, the large-scale counteroffensive by the regular forces. The Tet Offensive<sup>72</sup>, launched by eighty-four thousand North Vietnamese regular and guerilla forces attacked

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<sup>70</sup> Frances Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972), p 238-239.

<sup>71</sup> Palmer, p 181

every major U.S. base, the U.S. embassy, thirty-six of the forty provincial capitals, and sixty-four district capitals.<sup>73</sup>

Tactically, the Tet Offensive was a clear victory for the U.S. and South Vietnamese forces. In the first week alone, U.S. and South Vietnamese forces killed in excess 15,000 men, and by the conclusion of the offensive, 45,000 of the initial 84,000 communist forces were casualties.<sup>74</sup> Only one city, Hue, actually fell into enemy hands and was later retaken by U.S. forces. Upon conclusion of the offensive, communist forces were shattered and unable to resume offensive operations.

At the strategic level, the Tet Offensive caused a psychological dislocation of the U.S. public.<sup>75</sup> President Johnson and General Westmoreland contributed to this dislocation by deceiving the American people that there was "light at the end of the tunnel" in regards to the Vietnam War. "Over the past year, [General] Westmoreland and [Ambassador] Bunker had given the impression that the enemy threat had receded, that American troops had pushed the main force units out of the populated areas into the jungles of the border."<sup>76</sup> However, just the opposite had occurred. The Communist Tet Offensive had raised serious doubts about the American military strategy and

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<sup>72</sup> The Tet Offensive is named after the Vietnamese New Year: Tet.

<sup>73</sup> Fitzgerald, p 388.

<sup>74</sup> Davidson, p 475.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p 480.

<sup>76</sup> Fitzgerald, p 391.

most importantly, had caused a psychological trauma in the American populace.

# INDOCHINA



This map illustrates the military divisions of South Vietnam during the Vietnam War. The country is divided into four main corps areas: I Corps in the north, II Corps in the central region, III Corps in the south, and IV Corps in the Mekong Delta. The map also shows the borders with Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and North Vietnam. Key cities and towns are marked, including Hanoi, Haiphong, Vinh, Hue, Da Nang, Pleiku, Saigon, and Ho Chi Minh City. The Mekong River and the Gulf of Thailand are also depicted.

**Geographical Features:**

- Neighboring Countries:** THAILAND, LAOS, CAMBODIA, NORTH VIETNAM.
- Water Bodies:** Gulf of Thailand, SOUTH CHINA SEA, Mekong River.

**Military Divisions and Key Locations:**

- I CORPS:** Located in the north, covering areas from Hanoi down to Da Nang. Key locations include Hanoi, Haiphong, Vinh, Quang Tri, Hue, Phu Bai, Da Nang, Chu Lai, My Lai, and Quang Ngai.
- II CORPS:** Located in the central region, covering areas from Da Nang down to Saigon. Key locations include Pleiku, An Khe, Kontum, Dakto, Binh Dinh, An Khe Pass, Qui Nhon, Tuy Hoa, Khanh Hoa, Nha Trang, Cam Ranh, Phan Rang, and Binh Thuan.
- III CORPS:** Located in the south, covering areas from Saigon down to the Mekong Delta. Key locations include Saigon, Long Binh, Xuan Loc, Binh Tuy, Binh Long, Tay Ninh, and Phuoc Tay.
- IV CORPS:** Located in the Mekong Delta, covering areas from Saigon down to the Gulf of Thailand. Key locations include Can Tho, My Tho, Vinh Long, and Bac Lieu.

**Other Labels:**

- WAR ZONE C:** Located in the central region, south of Pleiku.
- PARROT'S BEAK:** A specific area within War Zone C.
- DMZ:** Demilitarized Zone, located near Hanoi.
- LAOS RIVER:** A river flowing through the central region.

## VIII. ALTERNATIVE U.S. STRATEGY

*I think that in time...it's going to be difficult for us to very long prosecute effectively a war that far away from home with the divisions that we have here and particularly the potential divisions. And it's really had me concerned for a month and I'm very depressed about it because I see no program from either Defense or State that gives me much hope of doing anything except just praying and grasping to hold on during [the] monsoon [season] and hope they'll [North Vietnamese] quit. And I don't believe they're ever goin to quite. And I don't see...that we have any...plan for victory militarily or diplomatically.<sup>77</sup>*

-President Lyndon Baines Johnson  
21 June 1965

By 1965, President Johnson was faced with two indisputable facts in regards to Vietnam. First, the U.S. could not stay in Vietnam forever, and second that the communist regime in North Vietnam could not be destroyed. With these facts facing him, Johnson had to decide between two alternatives: either (1) completely withdraw all U.S. forces in South Vietnam, or (2) sufficiently strengthen South Vietnam militarily, as well as socio-economically, to render it invulnerable to communist subversion.<sup>78</sup>

The withdrawal of U.S. forces from Vietnam, though easiest to implement, had severe political ramifications. The U.S. backed SEATO agreement was an irrefutable U.S. statement that they would defend Vietnam from communist subjugation. A U.S.

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<sup>77</sup> McNamara, p 190.

<sup>78</sup> Vu-van-Thai, *Fighting and Negotiating in Vietnam: A Strategy* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corp., 1969), p 28.



withdrawal from this agreement would severely discredit the U.S. on the world stage. Second, a retreat from South Vietnam would doom it to eventual communization. The fall of South Vietnam may impose a crippling domino effect toward the communization of the entire region. Lastly, communism was considered morally wrong, and the U.S., as the standard for the moral high ground, could not stand idly by and allow this to occur.

The question then was how to successfully strengthen South Vietnam and render it invulnerable to communist subversion. First, clarity of purpose was required to ensure that the legislative branch, the U.S. populace, and senior U.S. commanders in Vietnam, understood what type of war was being fought, why it was being fought, and what desired outcome was intended.

This clarity would be provided in two forms: first, in a clearly defined U.S. strategy toward Vietnam, and second through a declaration of war against North Vietnam. The U.S. strategy should call for the further development of South Vietnam in order to successfully defend its own nation from North Vietnam.<sup>79</sup> In order to accomplish this, the U.S. would progressively improve the South Vietnamese forces and strengthen the socio-economic structure of South Vietnam. U.S. military involvement would be limited to deterrence against North Vietnam

escalation.<sup>80</sup> Second, a U.S. declaration of war against North Vietnam would tie the executive, legislative, and people in support of the war effort. With this declaration of war, the government, the people, and the military would each have a fundamental role in achieving the national strategy.

The U.S. military strategy employed to execute this national strategy would be strategically defensive; however, it would be made clear to North Vietnam that any renewed major offensive toward South Vietnam with the goal of undermining this national strategy would induce heavy U.S. retaliation. The U.S. military strategy would be implemented with U.S. forces establishing a strong defensive line in the I CTZ along the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel. This defensive line would expand across Laos to Thailand and occupied by Free World Forces. If, denied access into Laos for political reasons, extensive military raids, coupled with air interdiction would suffice.<sup>81</sup> This defensive line would accomplish two key strategic points. First, it would deny the North Vietnamese the ability to significantly influence the three pressure points: the I and II CTZ, and Saigon. By the removal of communist forces from these pressure points, the South Vietnamese forces could have concentrated more extensively on the pacification of South Vietnam. Second, the defense of

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<sup>79</sup> Palmer, p 183.

<sup>80</sup> Thai, p 30

<sup>81</sup> Palmer, p 182.

Laos was strategically necessary for the defense of the entire region for Laos was the linchpin in the Domino Theory throughout Southeast Asia. "The fall of Laos to communism could mean the subsequent fall of its still free neighbors, Cambodia and South Vietnam and, in all probability, Thailand and Burma."<sup>82</sup>

This defensive line would also allow American forces the flexibility to defend on terrain of their choosing and thus make the North Vietnamese forces attack well-prepared and fortified positions. This in turn would decrease the amount of U.S. casualties reducing the psychological impact of the war on the American people. Secondly, by removing the emphasis on search and destroy operations, U.S. forces could concentrate on training and developing the South Vietnamese militia and regional forces toward intervention in support of the local villages against the communist.<sup>83</sup> This in turn would increase popular support of the South Vietnamese forces on the home front and turn support against the communist.

In addition to the defensive line, U.S. naval power would maintain a constant visible and credible amphibious presence off the coast of North Vietnam. This U.S. naval power, to include Marines, would threaten a possible invasion from the sea of various important areas of North Vietnam.<sup>84</sup> Additionally, U.S.

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<sup>82</sup> Kissinger, p 641.

<sup>83</sup> Thai, p 33.

<sup>84</sup> Palmer, p 183.

naval power would blockade Haiphong Harbor and other northern ports. Cutting these lucrative trade routes would economically cripple North Vietnam and further impress upon them the need for negotiations. Lastly, U.S. air power would be restricted to air interdiction only and conducted along the 17<sup>th</sup> Parallel and over Laotian defensive line. Strategic bombing would only be used for major retaliation in the event of a breakdown of negotiations and/or enemy offensives by the North.<sup>85</sup>

The major U.S. logistical sites would be in the north (example: Da Nang which possessed a major port and a jet-capable airfield and Quang Ngai which also possessed a smaller port and airfield) with the effort of reinforcing frontline units. All other logistical sites would be scaled down to the minimum necessary to support the pacification effort of the South Vietnamese. The dollars saved by having reduced logistical sites could then be better utilized in the development of South Vietnamese forces and pacification projects such as farming improvements.<sup>86</sup>

At the political level, strong emphases would be placed on North Vietnam for the implementation of meaningful negotiations. Additionally, to ease tensions, President Johnson could offer North Vietnam a face saving gesture by the appointment of an ambassador to Hanoi. With a declared and demonstrated U.S.

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<sup>85</sup> Palmer, p 184.

willingness to support South Vietnam, including military actions and economic aid, coupled with strong and meaningful negotiations with North Vietnam for peace, South Vietnam would have an excellent chance for survival and even prosperity.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Thai, p 33-36.

<sup>87</sup> Palmer, p 186.

## IX. Conclusion

*These three tendencies [the passion (people), the play of chance (military), the policy (government)] are like three different codes of law, deep rooted in their subject and yet variable in their relationship to one another. A theory that ignores any one of them or seeks to fix an arbitrary relationship between them would conflict with reality to such an extent that for this reason alone it would be useless.*<sup>88</sup>

-Clausewitz

The Tet Offensive of 1968 is perceived as the culmination of a flawed U.S. strategy. This U.S. military triumph was transformed into a political and psychological defeat for the U.S. Additionally, it brought an end to the Johnson Administration as well as the reassignment of General Westmoreland. Lastly, the Tet Offensive brought about the demise of the U.S. military strategy of ROLLING THUNDER and Search and Destroy. The strategy of containment was not flawed but rather the implementation of that strategy was misguided. Clausewitz's concept of the "Trinity" in *On War* clearly defines the three requirements - people, government, and military - for the proper execution of war. However, none of these three requirements were present in Vietnam.

The U.S. resources were present; however, what was missing was a bold decision by the President, admittedly involving some risk, to implement a strategy that would have allowed the United

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<sup>88</sup> Clausewitz, p 89.

States and its allies to turn the strategic tables on Hanoi.<sup>89</sup> President Johnson failed to provide this bold decision and Secretary of Defense McNamara, along with the JCS and General Westmoreland, failed to provide an imaginative concept for the conduct of the war.

Second, this paper argued that the national will of the people and congress was never established. A declaration of war would have polarized the people and congress for greater support of our national strategy in Vietnam. The evidence clearly indicates that Hanoi, by mobilizing the passions of its people, possessed the will to win. Conversely, President Johnson purposely avoided mobilizing the passions of the U.S. people. This blunder in turn mobilized the masses against his national strategy.

In conclusion, an alternative strategy was proposed. This strategy, if implemented, would have galvanized the people behind the U.S. strategy in Vietnam. It would have given the military Commanders in Vietnam the flexibility required to execute a military strategy capable of defeating not only the communist forces of North Vietnam but also the pacification of South Vietnam. Lastly, and most important, this proposed strategy would provide President Johnson the means to achieve the stated goal of communist containment in Vietnam.

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<sup>89</sup> Palmer, p 188.

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